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The “Great Game”; Archives and Canadian Literature in the 1960s and 1970s: Margaret Laurence and McMaster University’s William Ready

KATHLEEN GARAY

IN AN APRIL 1968 LETTER to McMaster University Librarian William Ready, Canadian writer Margaret Laurence borrowed Ready’s own phrase to describe the librarian’s latest archival coup, the acquisition of the papers of the internationally renowned English philosopher Bertrand Russell:

What a coup you have brought off! I really felt almost as pleased as though I had done it myself! . . . [W]hat a thing to have accomplished for McMaster! I do most heartily congratulate you. It must be, as you are quoted as saying, “a great game” — and you obviously have an enormous talent for it. . . . [Y]ou ought to get a brass band reception when you arrive back at McMaster. . . .¹

Although the purchase of the Russell archives was his best-known accomplishment in his years at McMaster, Ready was also responsible for developing many other collecting areas of the University Library and, in particular, the Archives. The papers of living Canadian writers were a particular focus, and Ready’s correspondence with Laurence provides a revealing glimpse of how the Laurence manuscripts became a cornerstone of McMaster’s CanLit holdings. The Laurence acquisition also served as a significant precedent, providing a place for Canadian women writers in the nascent literary holdings of Canadian university archives.

Canadian university libraries, and specifically the archival collection spaces that emerged within them, have had a significant place in fostering the development of Canadian literature and, the evidence suggests, even in defining the literary canon. The energetic pursuit of the papers of Canadian writers in the late 1960s and 1970s saw university

libraries offering cash payments to Canadian writers, first for manuscripts and then for correspondence and other evidence of the creative process. In the discussion that follows, I first survey the cultural, academic, and archival contexts in which these initiatives emerged, creating, for the first time, a market for the personal papers of the active practitioners of Canadian literature. I then examine the pioneering role of McMaster University Library, under the direction of William Ready, in the genesis and expansion of Canadian literary archives during the 1960s and 1970s, with particular focus on his relationship with Laurence as revealed in a series of hitherto unpublished letters.

The 1960s saw Canadian literature come of age, in tandem with the country's gradual recognition of its own identity. Increasingly, this identity was seen as separate from Canada's traditional ties with Britain and separate, in particular, from the United States, which, despite its evident economic continental dominance, was embroiled in a war with which few Canadians could identify or could support. The emergence of the genre was gradual, assisted as much by academic recognition in the form of an increasing number of CanLit university courses as by developing Canadian nationalism. Margaret Atwood was probably reflecting the experience of her generation, growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, when she observed that "I started reading Canadian literature when I was young, though I didn't know it was that; in fact I wasn't aware that I lived in a country with any distinct existence of its own" (29).

Although it might not have been evident to the teenage Peggy Atwood, the cultural climate was about to change. The 1951 report of the *Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, 1949-1951*, usually referred to as the Massey Report, provided a dispiriting overview of almost every aspect of Canadian cultural life. The news from the worlds of creative writing and publishing was particularly bleak. The authors of the report posed a weighty central question, along with one contributor's gloomy response:

Is it true, then, that we are a people without a literature? . . . Defining the term "Canadian literature" as the reflection in works of imagination of the interests, the ideals and the character of our people, the author of one of our studies states that Canada cannot yet show an adequate number of works that correspond to this description. "The unpalatable truth is," he continues, "that today in Canada there exists no body of creative writing which reflects

adequately, or with more than limited insight, the nature of the Canadian people and the historic forces which have made them what they are." (222)²

Nor was this an isolated opinion according to the Massey Report: "[A]ll our informants agree that Canada has not yet established a national literature" (225). In such a context, it was hardly surprising that the report found that only fourteen English-language works of fiction were published in the whole of 1948 (228). But where did the solution lie? Although the relatively small size and wide distribution of Canada's population presented a major challenge for publishers, "if our publishers could offer to the public a greater number of novels of outstanding quality, the publishing business in Canada would undoubtedly be more prosperous" (229).

In seeking answers to this perceived literary deficit, the Massey commissioners returned to the plight of Canadian writers, a segment of the arts community that historically had found itself "at the bottom of the heap" in terms of any government support (Vance 344). The commissioners, reaffirming the words of the Canadian Arts Council brief of the previous year, observed that "No novelist, poet, short story writer, historian, biographer, or other writer of non-technical books can make even a modestly comfortable living by selling his work in Canada" (Massey Report 182). The authors of the report reached for some practical solution:

If we have properly understood what we have been told, the Canadian writer suffers from the fact that he is not sufficiently recognized in our national life, that his work is not considered necessary to the life of his country; and it is this isolation which prevents his making his full contribution. It seems therefore to be necessary to find some way of helping our Canadian writers to become an integral part of their environment and, at the same time, to give them a sense of their importance in this environment. (227)

The solution presented to assist writers (and it is revealing that individual writers were referred to throughout the report as "he") was one of the most important of the 146 wide-ranging and ambitious recommendations of the Massey Report (Vance 360). The Canada Council, established in 1957, was designed "to foster and promote the study and enjoyment of, and the production of works in, the arts," to encour-

age writers, and to provide assistance to Canadian-owned publishers. Such assistance was to prove significant. To cite a single but influential example, the New Canadian Library, under discussion since 1952, was finally launched in 1958 with the lofty goal of providing cheap, accessible editions of books written by Canadians or set in Canada between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries (Friskney 3). Further effects were demonstrated the following year, and 1959 has been called "a big year for Canadian literature, the start of something not yet visible" (Mount 6). In that year, the *Toronto Star* established a daily book column, Mavis Gallant, Marie-Claire Blais, and Sheila Watson all published their first novels, and the University of British Columbia began offering courses in Canadian literature (Mount 6).

These elements combined to define the 1960s as a time of growing self-consciousness and self-confidence, a period during which, as Canadian writer Pierre Berton phrased it, "the country fell in love with itself" (qtd. in Porter 81). This period of "cultural flowering" culminated in the celebrations surrounding Canada's centennial in 1967. The decade that began with the establishment of the Canada Council and ended with the centennial celebrations "saw growing public interest in all forms of culture, a willingness at every level of government to fund the arts, and a broad acceptance of the link between nationalism and culture" (Vance 366). Marking the occasion in a monumental way, the National Library and Archives of Canada finally moved into a long-promised new building in Ottawa.

Canada's universities could not fail to be affected. James Greenlee observes in his volume of the official history of McMaster University,

From the Rowell-Sirois Commission (1940), through the Massey Report (1951), to the Royal Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects (1957), various observers had called official attention to a correlation between higher education and national well-being. By the late fifties, this message filtered down to the general public, at which time it was embraced with a hitherto unimaginable fervour. . . . [U]nprecedented prosperity, the baby boom, soaring consumer expectations, and not a few Cold War anxieties fuelled the mania for university degrees. . . . (6)

On a practical level, the period saw increasingly available government funding for Canada's universities. With enrolment exploding, the number of university faculty members and course offerings also increased

in the effort to keep pace. In this expansionist climate, academic libraries were developing their collections to support the augmented course offerings and to reflect the growing emphasis on Canadian literature in the curriculum offerings of their institutions. In turn, these expanding course offerings, delivered to an ever-increasing student body, stimulated a new market for books, a market further invigorated by the paperback revolution that had originated first in Britain and subsequently developed in the United States. Academic libraries bolstered their book collections with the latest offerings from Canadian publishers. They purchased volumes from established companies such as McClelland and Stewart as well as the increasing number of upstart small presses emerging across Canada, among the most prominent of which in Ontario were Coach House Press, established in 1966, and House of Anansi, formed in 1967. Nor was this cultural revival evident only in the book holdings of libraries — the more ambitious and well-funded libraries were also establishing or redefining their archival collections.

The 1950s had already seen the evolution of some university archives into increasingly independent departments of university libraries in both Canada and the United States. In the summer of 1949, a survey was conducted by American archivists to determine the extent of archival awareness in institutions of higher learning in the United States and Canada. In disapproving tones, the authorial committee reported that “Too many of the schools reporting apparently have not yet comprehended the modern objectives of archival agencies. For this reason, their archivists are usually given one or two rooms in the library with the expectation that nothing will be preserved but old programs, a few very ancient trustee and faculty minutes, and some college publications” (Dwight Wilson 344).

The archival records of universities themselves often served as focal points for academic archives, and they were frequently augmented by other manuscript materials and historical collections, often acquired in a less than systematic way. As former National Archivist of Canada Ian Wilson observes, “Each university has its own character and self-image, produced by a blend of tradition, faculty or curricular interests and goals, and alumni spirit. This diversity is reflected in the extent of the resources, in the mandate allotted the archivist and in the defined balance between university records and private manuscripts” (“Canadian” 17). These archival “special collections,” because of their particular

requirements for storage and security, were frequently combined with rare book collections in a separate physical space within the library. As Wilson observes, "Professionally staffed and recognized university archives are relatively recent phenomena in Canada. Prior to 1960, there was no Canadian university archivist" (18). Progress was slow in the academic context, and, writing in 1975, Wilson suggests that "Few universities have articulated archival goals and the advancement or decline of their archival programmes is a clear indicator of the effectiveness of their archivists. . . . In some universities, the archival programme can be viewed as an extension of the archivist's personality" (18).³

At the national level in Canada, however, archival collecting policies, particularly as they related to historical materials, had a distinguished institutional tradition. The position of Dominion Archivist was effectively established in 1872 when Douglas Brymner was appointed to head the Archives Branch formed in the Department of Agriculture. Until his death in 1902, Brymner pursued his "noble dream" of seeking to "obtain from all sources private as well as public . . . such documents as may throw light on social, commercial, municipal, as well as purely political history" (Ian Wilson, "Archives"). The following year the Records Branch of the Department of the Secretary of State and the Archives Branch of the Department of Agriculture were established, and Dominion Archivist Arthur G. Doughty added the title of Keeper of the Records to his jurisdiction. The availability of national archival collections in Ottawa, increasing both in volume and in accessibility, directly influenced the writing and teaching of Canadian history: "For the generation of historical scholars after WWI, the Archives became a summer meeting place to research, exchange ideas, organize the profession, plan new publications and renew enthusiasm before returning to their winter vigils teaching Canadian history, often alone, at scattered universities" (Ian Wilson, "Archives").

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the staff of the National Archives, under W. Kaye Lamb and his successor Wilfred I. Smith, grew in number and professionalism. Once again the recommendations of the Massey Report had a seminal influence. Stressing the importance of archival collections to the preservation of Canada's history and culture, the report engaged vigorously in matters concerning the National Archives: "Before the staff of the Archives is enlarged, however, an investigation should be made of the qualifications and duties of the

present staff. We do not consider it our duty to make detailed recommendations on this matter. We note the fact that of more than thirty people now apparently engaged in professional archival work fewer than half have anything beyond high school education" (339). Among the commission's recommendations was this one: "That the present staff of the Archives be increased by the addition of properly qualified persons; that an effort be made to recruit a certain number of mature and highly qualified staff-members to assist with the work in public records and other historical manuscripts; that the present policy of engaging for professional archival duties only those with adequate historical training be continued" (340).

As well as establishing improved standards for National Archives personnel, the Canadian archival profession began a process of self-definition, gradually emerging from its originating organization, the Canadian Historical Association (CHA). Whereas American archivists had published their own scholarly journal since 1938, its Canadian equivalent, *The Canadian Archivist/Archiviste canadien*, produced by the Archives Section of the CHA,⁴ did not appear until 1963, and only twelve issues were published between 1963 and 1974. The launching of *Archivaria* in 1975 and the establishment of the Association of Canadian Archivists (Ian Wilson, "Archives") marked significant steps in the process of professional identification and separation from the CHA, though the traditional historical focus of many archives and many archivists remained, and still remains, evident.

In accord with the increasingly theoretical approach to archival practice, acquisition policies at the National Archives were refined, and, along with public records and documentary art, the process of collecting private manuscripts became more systematic.⁵ Collecting policies gradually began to reflect a concern wider than that of the traditional historian. Reaching beyond the areas of politics, religion, and military matters into the fields of literature and the arts (Swift 48), such expanded mandates were to provide a more holistic reflection of the country's preoccupations and accomplishments. As Tom Symons was to observe by the early 1980s, "Canadian archives are the foundation of Canadian studies and, indeed, of Canadian nationhood" (58).

This trend toward a concept of "total archives," combining all media from both private and public sources to document society, has been identified as a distinctive Canadian approach to archival service. The

expansion at the national level to include the resurgent areas of Canadian artistic life found its parallels at the level of Canadian academic libraries. However, such acquisitions were not without their early critics. Ian Wilson, writing in 1976, commented on “the controversial involvement of most of the university archives in soliciting and acquiring the private papers and records of individuals or organizations not directly connected with the universities.” He continued that “These acquisition programmes are defined by exceedingly vague, perhaps opportunistic terms, from solely regional interests to papers of national or even international figures. . . . [I]t may be questioned whether such programmes are properly the concern of traditionally defined archives” (Wilson, “Canadian” 23-24). Wilson recognized, however, the complex reasons for the growth of academic manuscript repositories and provided some justification for it:

The universities began collecting these records for much the same reasons that the federal and provincial archives departed from accepted European and American practices to collect private papers as well as official government records. All recognized the research significance of such collections and the necessity of taking action to preserve them in a society otherwise bereft of the tradition, inclination or facilities to care for such documents. (25)

It is within this cultural climate — the context of Canada’s cultural awakening and the related archival developments at the national, local, and academic levels — that the impetus to collect the literary archives of living writers occurred.⁶

Nick Mount’s recent study, *Arrival: The Story of CanLit*, records the acquisition strategies of Simon Fraser University, Dalhousie University, and the University of Toronto in the field of Canadian literature during the 1960s and 1970s. Simon Fraser and Dalhousie began collecting avant-garde and small press publications, and bookseller David Mason was given a copy of Reginald Watters’s eight-hundred-page *Checklist of Canadian Literature* and told to buy everything that the University of Toronto did not already have. The finding aids of the various institutions reveal or suggest the dates for the following archival acquisitions: the University of Toronto began purchasing manuscripts from Hugh MacLennan in 1962⁷ and followed this with purchases from John Newlove (who, says Mount, used the money to buy himself a new set of teeth) (ca. 1965, 1968, 1984), Gwendolyn MacEwen (probably post-1969),⁸ Leonard Cohen (ca. 1969),⁹ Margaret Atwood (1970),

and Earle Birney (ca. 1976). The University of Calgary stepped up to become “the country’s biggest buyer” in the mid-1970s, paying fifteen thousand dollars for MacLennan’s papers in 1973 and fifty thousand dollars for Mordecai Richler’s in 1974, plus fifty thousand dollars in tax receipts. By 1980, Mount observes, university library budgets had dried up, “leaving universities able to offer only tax receipts that benefit only writers with substantial income, like professors” (70-71).

However, Mount fails to mention that one of the first institutions to focus on the acquisition of Canadian literary manuscripts was Hamilton’s McMaster University, under the inspired direction of University Librarian William Ready, a Welsh-Irish wizard. As I will show, he acquired McMaster’s first of what were to be many CanLit accessions. In October 1966, Ready purchased a manuscript by Margaret Laurence.

Ready was born in Cardiff, Wales, in 1914. He studied bibliography in England and Wales and came to North America after the Second World War with his Canadian bride, obtained an MA from the University of Manitoba in 1949, and began his career as an acquisitions librarian at Stanford University. Acquisitions continued to be his focus when he became Director of Libraries at Marquette University from 1956 to 1963. According to the Marquette University Archives website, Ready was appointed with the understanding that he would “aggressively” collect material for the newly constructed Memorial Library. His inspired response to his mandate is documented:

He recognized *The Lord of the Rings* as a masterpiece soon after its publication, long before the work and its author gained enormous popularity. With administrative approval, Ready approached Tolkien in 1956 through Bertram Rota, a well-known rare book dealer in London. At the time, no other institution had expressed an interest in Tolkien’s literary manuscripts. After a relatively brief period of negotiation, an agreement was reached whereby Marquette purchased the manuscripts for £1,500 (or less than \$5,000).¹⁰

Ready lectured on Tolkien to the student body at Sacred Heart University in Bridgeport, Connecticut, on 28 March 1966 during the year that he spent there as joint chief librarian (*Obelisk* 4). One suspects that working in tandem was not his preferred *modus operandi*, though before Ready left for Canada the two library heads co-produced “a guide to the library” that they titled *The Reward of Reading*. The

pamphlet, alphabetically arranged, is an eccentric blend of William Morris-style alphabetical illuminations and quintessentially 1950s-style cartoon drawings. Ready must surely have written the entry under A: "Acquisition is the beginning. Acquisition is the acquiring of the collection. . . . [I]t is both the most difficult and the most pleasant part of all library service" (Ready and Matzek 7). And it is tempting to conclude that Ready must also have provided the final entry: "Zeal is a virtue in librarianship that can be of paramount importance if it is coupled with professional experience and understanding" (Ready and Matzek 37).

His own literary tastes seem to have been wide ranging, as befits a zealous acquisitions librarian. An article that Ready wrote for the Marquette *Monitor* in 1960 demonstrates his particular interest in women's writing with its headline asserting "Women in the Writing Craft Producing Some of Today's Finest Books." Ready cites Canadian author Gabrielle Roy, Katherine Mansfield "from woolly New Zealand" who "rocked the Bloomsbury group of Virginia Woolf off their axis," Flannery O'Connor, and Harper Lee. Ready observes that "*To Kill a Mockingbird* is not only the finest novel to have come out of the south in a long while; it is also a spiritual experience to read it, and like nearly all the books mentioned so far, it was written, alas, by a woman." However, his admiration was not without some, possibly tongue-in-cheek, qualification:

Reading *Pride and Prejudice* again the other day, as I do regularly every season, I realized with something of a shock that Jane Austen is one of the greatest artists of the world. The only field of creative art wherein women have done themselves justice is in writing; there have even been some good women poets whereas, as all the world knows, there has never been a composer, painter or sculptor worthy of her sex.

After his brief time at Sacred Heart, Ready returned to Canada, and he was appointed chief librarian at McMaster University effective 1 July 1966.¹¹ McMaster provided receptive ground for Ready to employ his talents. Established in 1887 in Toronto as a small Baptist college, the university had begun to grow following its move to Hamilton in 1930. It had officially ceased to be a Baptist institution in 1957, making it eligible for public funding, and from 1961 to 1972 McMaster flourished under its dynamic president, Henry G. (Harry) Thode (Shaw et al. 11).

Like those at other Canadian universities, the student body at McMaster swelled during the 1950s, and funding flowed to facilitate the expansion of courses and facilities (Greenlee 7-8). The University Library, previously housed in the neo-gothic University Hall, opened in its own purpose-built modernist building in 1951, named Mills Memorial Library after David Bloss Mills, whose Davella Mills Foundation funded its construction ("Mills Memorial" 3). Clearly it was not an inconsiderable facility even before the move to its new quarters: the organizational conference of the Canadian Library Association was held in June 1946 at McMaster University, having as its theme "Libraries in the Life of the Canadian Nation" (Peel 83). But the combination of Ready's unique skills with the administrative support and institutional ambition of Harry Thode meant a whole new era for the library and subsequently for its archives. Funds were plentiful in Ready's early years, and the chief librarian made good use of them, developing, for example, one of the best collections of eighteenth-century books in North America.¹²

Called "Cunning, Devious, Relentless, Ruthless (and Sneaky)" by one reporter (Grescoe 28) and, scarcely more politely, a "bibliophilic buccaneer" of the first order by a senior university administrator (Greenlee 91),¹³ Ready was well able to adapt to the more frugal times that followed: "Will Ready presided over the extraordinary development of Mills' collection in a tight-fisted age. Beneath his deceptively gnome-like exterior, there burned a swashbuckling urge bent on sustaining momentum, gathered in the sixties, toward shaping a front-rank research library, even during a decade of general want" (Greenlee 305).

A little more than a year after his arrival (Griffin), Ready secured his best-known archival coup on behalf of McMaster, the purchase that prompted Margaret Laurence's letter of April 1968. But this acquisition, which gave McMaster international prominence, tends to obscure the librarian's careful and systematic archival collection development work in other areas, the earliest and most significant of which was in purchasing the papers of living Canadian writers. Ready, who had already learned the value of archival acquisitions and, as we have seen, was an omnivorous reader, magically found money to purchase living Canadian writers' papers, building an extensive collection that would grow to include Farley Mowat (1970), Pierre Berton (1974), Susan Musgrave

(1975), Peter C. Newman (1976), the publishing house of McClelland and Stewart (1977), Matt Cohen (1979), Irish Canadian playwright John Coulter (1969), as well as Canadian poets John Robert Colombo (1969) and Douglas Fetherling (1970). With this base firmly established, important literary collections continued to be purchased after Ready's death in 1981, including the papers of Marian Engel (1982), Austin Clarke (1982), and Jack McClelland (1987), among others.¹⁴

Within weeks of returning to Canada, Ready met Margaret Laurence in Toronto and approached her about purchasing her manuscripts. Thus began a correspondence, a friendship, and a collection.¹⁵ When Laurence first met Ready in Toronto, she was living in England with her two young children. Born in Manitoba in 1926, she was only twenty-two when she married civil engineer Jack Laurence and moved with him, following his work, first to London, then to Africa, back to London, to Africa again, and back to Canada. The couple spent five years in Vancouver, and then, following their separation in 1962, Laurence returned to London with the children, this time staying ten years. Her first published book, *A Tree for Poverty*, a collection of Somali stories and poems, appeared in 1954, and in 1960 her first novel, *This Side Jordan*, was published by McClelland and Stewart in Canada¹⁶ and Macmillan in London. McClelland and Stewart also published *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, a memoir of her life in Somaliland, and a short-story collection, *The Tomorrow-Tamer*, in 1963. Laurence's agent, John Cushman, presented the memoir, the short-story collection, and the novel, eventually called *The Stone Angel*, to Knopf of New York as a package and obtained an advance of five thousand dollars for Laurence. By December, she had left London and rented a country house, Elm Cottage, in Buckinghamshire, from her British publisher (King 189).

The decade of the 1960s was her most productive writing period, but Laurence struggled not only with the writing process itself, made more difficult by her responsibilities as a single mother, but also with attitudes that, she thought, made it more difficult for a woman writer to find an audience. In her posthumously published memoir, Laurence observed that "Writing by women, in those and the following years, was generally regarded by critics and reviewers in this country with at best an amused tolerance, at worst a dismissive shrug. It still makes me angry how thoroughly I had been brainwashed by society, despite having

been greatly encouraged by two of my male professors at college, whom I bless to this day." Laurence had first submitted poems to the student paper at the University of Manitoba using the name Steve Lancaster, and later, still disguising her gender, she called herself J.M. Wemyss: "I cringe with shame to recall it now. . . . How long, how regrettably long, it took me to find my true voice as a woman writer" (*Dance* 5).¹⁷

In finding her true voice, Laurence allowed other women to find theirs. Susan Jackel, an Honours English student at the University of Toronto's University College in the early 1960s, was taught by an all-male faculty for whom both women's writing and Canadian literature were "non-subjects":

By 1961 the Canadian part had shrunk to a single title at the very end of the year, and since we didn't get around to it anyway I don't even recall what it was. . . . [O]nly through book reviewing for *The Varsity* did I encounter fiction and poetry by Canadian authors, and reviewing Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* on its appearance in 1964 was decisive in defining my field and topic when I returned as an M.A. student two years later. (103)

Laurence's writing, especially *The Stone Angel*, also caused Margaret Atwood to reflect. In a chapter of *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) entitled "Ice Women vs. Earth Mothers: The Stone Angel and the Absent Venus," she recalls that "I remember wondering after first reading Margaret Laurence's novel *The Stone Angel* why most of the strong and vividly-portrayed female characters in Canadian literature are old women. . . . They live their lives with intensity, but through gritted teeth . . ." (199).

In 1964, when *The Stone Angel* was published, Laurence was thirty-eight, and despite her literary productivity she was indeed living life in London "through gritted teeth." As the single parent of two young children, she faced a constant challenge to find time and money to write. She had applied for Canada Council funding before leaving Vancouver, but she had not been optimistic about her chances: "Probably they won't give me anything, as married women are not supposed to need any money of their own, or something like that."¹⁸ Her prediction proved to be correct, and she refused to apply again.

Laurence returned to Canada in the summer of 1966 to promote her third novel, *A Jest of God*. Her publisher, the ever-energetic and

imaginative Jack McClelland, had set up a five-city book tour,¹⁹ and it was during this visit that she met William Ready, newly arrived in Canada to take up his post at McMaster University. Laurence did not fail to resume their conversation once back in England. She wrote from Elm Cottage on 19 October 1966:²⁰

Dear Mr. Ready,

When we met in Toronto, you expressed interest in buying some of my manuscripts. I must confess that this seems slightly incredible to me, but if you are still interested, I would be only too delighted. I arrived back from Canada last week and I have now gone through my papers. Many of the manuscripts of short stories and those of my first two books seem to be missing, and I can't think what has happened to them. They may turn up ultimately. However, I do have the manuscripts for my last two novels — *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God*.

Perhaps you will let me know if you would like these manuscripts. They are both the first typed versions, with all my re-writing and deletions. Personally, I think they look terrible, but you may miraculously disagree.

Sincerely,
Margaret Laurence

Ready's response from Canada must have been fast and positive,²¹ for Laurence wrote to Ready again only ten days later on 30 October 1966:

Dear Professor Ready,

Thanks very much for your letter. Your offer of \$1,500 for the manuscripts seems most generous to me, and I am very grateful indeed. In fact, it is a positive godsend at the moment — I am hoping that I may be able to buy my house, which I love dearly. It has to be sold, so if I am unable to buy it, I shall have to move and I dread the thought of that. This unexpected money, therefore, is like a kind of miracle as far as I'm concerned.

I am sending the manuscripts of THE STONE ANGEL and A JEST OF GOD²² to you by airmail. There are eight envelopes in all, as I have followed your advice about means of sending the manuscripts. . . .²³

By the following month, on 8 November 1966, their correspondence had already become less formal:

Dear Will,

I quite agree that it is better to be on a first-name basis — at least, I always prefer it. Many many thanks [sic] for arranging to have the cheque sent — I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. . . .

At the same time, Laurence continued to focus on the purchase of Elm Cottage, as she indicates in her letter to Ready of 3 December 1966:

Dear Will

The cheque arrived, and to say that it is appreciated would be a miracle of understatement. Many many thanks [sic]. I still don't know if I'm going to be able to get my house, but this money from McMaster is a really enormous help in this respect. . . .²⁴

A typed copy of one of Ready's replies survives from 29 March 1967:

Dear Margaret,

I just heard this morning that you had been awarded the Governor General's prize. I know that in Canada there are so few like you, none as good, that this award might not ring as loudly as others you deserve. But for all that I welcome it and hope that somehow or other it will bring our paths nearer soon.²⁵

In the letter that follows from 4 April 1968, the one previously cited in which Laurence congratulates Ready on his Russell coup, she also sympathizes with him on the loss of his mother and reveals some of her own struggles:

I have myself just finished writing a new novel and am in the process of typing out some 300 pp in triplicate, very boring and soul destroying, but it has to be done — can't get this novel typed by a typist, as the manuscript is so scribbled over that only I can read it and even I have difficulty sometimes. Whether or not it will turn out to be a publishable novel remains to be seen. One just does not know, and I suffer agonies of uncertainty. But I know I must just continue and get it typed out and let the publishers see it — I can't know, myself, at this point, whether it communicates anything to anyone else or not. . . .

Next time you are in England (possibly buying Graham Greene's manuscripts or the private letters of Harold Wilson to his psychiatrist?) please do try to take the time to come out here.

The demands of completing and revising *The Fire-Dwellers* appear to have halted correspondence from Laurence until the fall. She wrote from Elm Cottage on 11 September:

It seems a little presumptuous of me to be writing to you about the question of manuscripts, but you did ask me to let you know re. my new novel, and expressed interest in buying the original manuscript of same. Well, the novel was completed in March, and the final revisions were done in July. All three publishers seem to like the book, thank goodness, so it will be published in the spring. I don't think it would be ethical for me to sell the manuscript until the book is published, but would you like me to sell it to you then?

Ready, who had been travelling in Europe, responded with typical alacrity and enthusiasm:

Dear Margaret,

I got in this morning and I am writing to you first of all.

Of course, of course, of course, we want your manuscripts, including the Nigerian. Send them to me as soon as you can and I will send you the money as soon as I can. . . .

Again, do write soon and send the manuscripts.²⁶

Whatever the state of his budget, Ready was unwilling to risk losing any literary treasure. As Greenlee observed of him, "Goals mattered. Methods could be improvised" (91).

By October 1968, Ready had begun sending Laurence his own writings; in response to receiving his newly published *The Tolkien Relation: A Personal Inquiry*, Laurence purchased and then read *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time.²⁷ Ready was an established writer: while working on his MA at the University of Manitoba, he wrote a column in *The Winnipeg Tribune* and articles for *The Beaver*, the Hudson's Bay Company magazine, as well as published fiction in *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Atlantic* (Dobbs 50). There had been earlier books also: *The Great Disciple and Other Stories* appeared in 1951, *Weerawannas* in 1953, and *The Poor Hater: A Novel* about Irish Americans in 1958. His wide-ranging interests continued to be reflected in his published work. Following the Tolkien study, Ready published *Necessary Russell: An Introduction to the Life and Times of Bertrand Russell* in 1969, a study on library automation (with Tom Drynan) in 1977, and

Losers, Keepers: A Play in Two Acts in 1979. *Files on Parade: A Memoir* appeared posthumously in 1982. In a 1968 letter, Laurence expressed interest in reading a forthcoming book by Ready called *The Canadian Imagination*,²⁸ but I can find no evidence that it was ever published.²⁹

Laurence and Ready were supposed to meet in London in December 1968 but somehow managed to miss one another. Laurence, always struggling to overcome her sometimes crippling shyness, had clearly been uncomfortable waiting ninety minutes in a hotel lobby: “[M]aybe my natural puritanical inhibitions about peering around bars by myself was really to blame!! I sat in the lounge looking ever-so-country-matronly, I think!”³⁰

In January, Laurence congratulated Ready on the results of his recent visit to Britain: “I’m so glad your trip here was successful — it must be very exciting to buy books and manuscripts which are of great value. . . .”³¹ Laurence’s own valuable manuscripts were starting to attract attention. In a Hamilton *Spectator* review of *Long Drums and Cannons* in March 1969, McMaster faculty member James Dale referred to the excisions in the manuscript version and observed that “the recent excitement about the acquisition of the Russell papers has thrust into the background another valuable addition to the manuscripts held by McMaster University Library — the manuscripts of major works by Margaret Laurence.”³² She had sent the manuscript of *Long Drums and Cannons* to Ready as soon as the book appeared in October 1968. Laurence had considered sending *The Fire-Dwellers* at that time but, as we have seen, decided that it might be more ethical to wait until the book’s appearance in the spring. In the event, she sent it in January “by registered sea mail.”³³

Laurence’s next letter, dated 16 October 1969, was written on notepaper with the printed heading “University of Toronto Writer in Residence”:

Dear Will:

Well here I am at last and trying to settle into my new job as Writer-in-Residence. The first two weeks I had the feeling that nothing was going to happen and that it was going to be an overly-quiet year but now things seem to be opening up considerably and I am beginning to have both a fascinating and a hectic time. . . .

Will, I hate to bring up the question of money but if my memory serves me correctly I seem to recall that after I sent you the

manuscripts of *Long Drums and Cannons* and *The Fire Dwellers* you said that you would be able to get another \$2000 for me. Were you referring only to these two manuscripts or did you mean future manuscripts? In point of fact I do have the manuscript of a book of Canadian short stories, *A Bird in the House* which will be published in the spring. I also have the manuscript of my children's book *Jason's Quest*, though possibly this won't be of much interest. My middle-class background makes me feel embarrassed to bring up this question but my real ambition at the moment is to find a cottage on the side of a Canadian lake, not too far from Toronto and perhaps to be able to buy it this year so that in another three years when my son is finished school I can move back as I very much want to do.

Hope to hear from you soon.³⁴

Laurence returned to Canada to receive an honorary degree, the first of many, from McMaster in the spring of 1971.³⁵ The next letter, in the McMaster business files, is to Susan Bellingham, the special collections librarian, dated 21 May 1973: "I shall be writing to Mr. Ready — I had not done so before because I was not certain where he was, as I knew he had been in hospital in Wales." Laurence asks whether there is interest in adding the typescript of *The Diviners* to the McMaster archives and whether the university would want the original handwritten version as well: "It is in 28 scribbles(!) and is pretty much of a mess, but if you want it you can have it. . . . My novel has been accepted both by Macmillan of England and Knopf of New York — I haven't yet heard from McClelland & Stewart, but feel hopeful, at this point."³⁶ Bellingham responded on 1 June 1973 on Ready's behalf:

Mr Ready has just come in and has asked me to write to you regarding the payment the library would make for the typescript and notebooks of *The Diviners*. He is still convalescing and comes into the library only occasionally.

As you may know, or might have guessed, economic pressures in the University are increasing, but I would like to suggest \$500 and hope that you would view this offer favourably.

Laurence replied promptly on 15 June:

The sum of \$500 for the manuscript of *The Diviners* is fine with me. I am having second thoughts about the notebooks — the reason being that they are pretty much the same as the first typescript,

which is the place where most of the rewriting has gone on. Also, I now see that I am going to have to do quite a lot more revision and rewriting, which will be done on the typescript, as I have now had consultations with my editors at all three publishers and we have pretty much agreed on the areas of the novel which still need more work. So it appears to me that the original typescript will really be the only interesting manuscript. . . . Please give my very very [sic] best wishes to Professor Ready when you see him.

Although it is certainly possible that Laurence thought that the draft of *The Diviners* contained in the notebooks was too similar to the first typescript to be of any value, it is more probable that her ingrained sense of privacy got the better of her. She had a pressing need for money throughout this period, first to assist with the purchase of her Elm Cottage home and then to buy her Canadian cottage — the “shack” on the Otonabee River — in 1969. Additional funds were also required to meet the daily demands of supporting her family. However, she was always uneasy about revealing details of the creative process that preceded the publication of her novels.

Laurence seems to have preferred less intrusive ways of disposing of the many “scribbles” that contained the first, handwritten drafts of her works as well as other potentially “archivable” materials. After deciding to sell her beloved Elm Cottage and return to Canada permanently in April 1973, she wrote to Jack McClelland about getting “the fourteen million tons of rubbish cleared out of this house” (qtd. in King 315). According to Laurence’s biographer, James King, “‘Clearing’ Elmcot meant burning most of her correspondence and typescripts” (315). Nor was a transatlantic move the only reason for such disposal: in a 1980 letter to Gabrielle Roy, Laurence reported that “I have three times made a false start on a novel, and so far have torn up about 50pp of handwriting” (qtd. in King 351). In 1986, knowing that she was dying and discouraged with the amount of revision that she saw as necessary to the second draft of her memoir, Laurence told Adele Wiseman that “I don’t feel like entering the manuscript again,” and, when the typescript of the second draft was completed, “she placed the six huge notebooks in which she had written *Dance on the Earth* in the garbage” confident that “Nobody sifts through the green garbage bags in Lakefield” (qtd. in King 381).

Laurence’s final surviving letter to Ready was written from Lakefield

on 2 May 1979 and reflects her continuing uneasiness about having her materials subject to public scrutiny:

Dear Will,

I found out quite by accident that McClelland & Stewart has let McMaster have a whole pile of papers, including letters from me. I think they might have asked my permission, but let it pass. I'd just like to point out (as no doubt you know) that although M & S owns the paper on which those letters are printed, the copyright of the words remains with me. So no one may use those words in any way without my written permission. I don't want to be awkward about this, but I am sure you will understand I have to be adamant on this point.

Lovely to see you and Bess, even if briefly, at the Berton dinner.

This letter has a memo attached from librarian Graham Hill³⁷ to Ready, dated 8 May 1979, explaining that the letters form part of the Jack McClelland archive and were subject to a twenty-five-year embargo, meaning that they could not be read without McClelland's permission. Hill also made clear his awareness that the library had no literary or copyright jurisdiction over the material. Despite her close friendship with Ready, Laurence remained uncomfortable with the inevitable public exposure of her working process that archiving facilitated. A note in the McMaster fonds description was no doubt added on her instruction: "First accrual: excised portions (lined through) of *The Diviners* manuscript (box 3) are never to be published or printed, including in review articles or critical articles."³⁸ Unsurprisingly, Laurence makes no mention of selling her manuscripts in her memoirs; indeed, the only reference that she makes to "my papers" is to the repository of her materials at York University (*Dance* 217).

Perhaps because she no longer had Ready's sympathetic and supportive hand directing the McMaster Archives (Ready retired in 1979 and died in 1981), from 1980 onward Laurence began to sell her correspondence, short-story manuscripts and other writing, as well as photographs and financial materials to York University.³⁹ However, McMaster did receive further materials from her estate, including, in the fifth accrual, drafts of her unfinished novel and her final notebooks, more than ten years after her death. No doubt in compliance with her wishes, this segment of her archive, containing the only significant handwritten material in the collection, also has very strict access restrictions:

"The fifth accrual (15-1998) was acquired from the Estate of Margaret Laurence in May 1998; access to this accrual is restricted to bona fide scholars who are either graduate students, have doctoral degrees or are faculty members at a recognised college or university. Researchers must comply with the rules of access and sign an application form in order to access the restricted items" (Margaret Laurence fonds).⁴⁰

During a time when Canadian writers were becoming more widely recognized and read, Margaret Laurence had an outstanding career that generated attention and rewards; both *A Jest of God* and *The Diviners* won Governor General's Literary Awards, she was made a companion of the Order of Canada in 1971, and fourteen universities, of which McMaster was the first, awarded her honorary degrees. And yet, as Laurence observes in her memoir, "It never occurred to me that I might be able to earn a living from writing. Just as well, for I . . . was a professional writer for many years before I could earn a living by the practice of my trade. Even then I was lucky, simply because my timing happened to be right" (*Dance* 74). Her timing included, as we have seen, a cultural and economic climate in which Canadian literature, Canadian universities, and Canadian archives all found enhanced positions.

It was a climate in which Canadian women writers were also slowly finding their place, albeit a less exalted one. Leaving aside the extravagant sums subsequently paid by the University of Calgary to MacLennan and Richler, Laurence might well have been paid less by McMaster University than her predominantly male contemporaries received elsewhere. Although Ready was likely working with a considerably smaller budget, the University of Toronto's payment of six thousand dollars for the manuscript of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* in the late 1960s, for example, amounted to more than Laurence received for all three of her most successful novels. As we have seen, she was paid fifteen hundred dollars for the manuscripts of *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God* (the amount was for both novels, not each) in 1966, two thousand dollars for *Long Drums and Cannons* and *The Fire-Dwellers* in 1969, and five hundred dollars for *The Diviners* in 1973. Well aware of the increasing challenges for university budgets, Ready complained in a note to Laurence in April 1974 that "There really is some sort of crisis financial [sic] facing the Ontario universities in these days. . . . I have been cajoling, persuading, appearing before budget committees,

cooking statistics, to keep my library budget up. . . . [T]he first thing that administrators try to cut is the library, not them.”⁴¹

However, the McMaster money, modest as it now seems, was transformative for Laurence and, just as importantly, conferred status — a kind of academic anointing — on a woman who was not yet Canada’s most successful novelist and not yet a “celebrity” (King 280) when Ready first approached her in 1966. His placement of her manuscripts in the archival pantheon was determinative both for her and for other Canadian writers. As Jacques Derrida observed in his seminal essay “Archive Fever,” “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (17).

Canadian archives were coming into their own in the 1960s and 1970s, and CanLit, also coming into its own, found its place within them. Purchasing the papers of living Canadian writers had significant implications for all Canadian literary creators, but especially for women, with Laurence pointing the way. And yet, as her correspondence with Ready demonstrates, these developments were not entirely dependent on the contextual circumstances or simply because, as she claimed, the “timing happened to be right.” The outstanding quality of her work and his perspicacity and daring came together to establish a precedent for archival collections in a collaboration that, in turn, significantly contributed to the shaping of Canada’s culture during a seminal period in its development.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This essay has been developed from remarks made at an informal keynote roundtable session, presented as part of Resurfacing/Refaire surface, a conference held at Mount Allison University and l’Université de Moncton in April 2018, conceived by Christl Verduyn and co-organized by Christl Verduyn, Andrea Cabajasky, Andrea Beverley, and Kirsty Bell. I am grateful for their inspiration.

NOTES

¹ Margaret Laurence to William Ready, 4 April 1968, William Ready fonds, box 9.

Laurence enclosed a clipping from the London *Observer* regarding the acquisition of the Russell papers; *Observer*, 31 March 1968, p. 3.

² Citing Professor E.A. McCourt, Special Study, "Canadian Letters" 3.

³ The Massey Report focused on national, provincial, and local archival institutions (e.g., 341–43) but did not address university archives specifically.

⁴ An Archives Section was formed within the Canadian Historical Association in 1956. It encouraged the development of an archives course at Carleton University and began publication of *The Canadian Archivist*. See Ian Wilson, "Archives."

⁵ "In the mid-1960s, the Manuscript Division undertook a survey of prominent individuals, families and corporate bodies as a basic step in developing a systematic programme for the acquisition of private papers" (Ormsby 45).

⁶ Canada began this practice earlier than many other countries. The archives of many distinguished twentieth-century British writers, for example, have been acquired by the Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin, including three of the authors on the 2005 Man Booker long list (Julian Barnes, Sebastian Barry, and Dan Jacobson), as well as the archives of Tom Stoppard, David Hare, Penelope Lively, Doris Lessing, John Fowles, and Penelope Fitzgerald. A memorandum submitted by the Working Group on UK Literary Heritage to Parliament as recently as 2006 proposed a "national strategy for the acquisition of modern literary manuscripts by UK institutions." See publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmcmucmeds/176/176we79.htm#.

⁷ Mount notes that MacLennan's own institution, McGill University, was not interested in them (70).

⁸ The archive consists of audiotapes of MacEwen reading.

⁹ The university paid six thousand dollars for the manuscript of *Beautiful Losers*, "easily twice what the book earned him in sales" (Mount 70).

¹⁰ See also tolkiengateway.net/wiki/William_Ready. Tolkien's personal and academic papers, as well as his other literary manuscripts, are at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

¹¹ H.G. Thode, President of McMaster University, to William Ready, 12 April 1966, William Ready fonds, box 60, "Biographical File."

¹² McMaster's eighteenth-century book and periodical collection is ranked in the company of Harvard and Yale universities as a partner in the awarding of an annual fellowship by the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. See asecs.press.jhu.edu/general%20site/fellowsh.html.

¹³ In note 118, Greenlee cites the personal recollection of Professor Emeritus Richard Rempel (413).

¹⁴ Dates have been supplied from the McMaster Archives finding aids. See also Dobbs (50).

¹⁵ Laurence's letters to Ready are in two locations in the Division of Archives and Research Collections at McMaster University: the internal "Master File" and William Ready fonds, box 9. I am most grateful for the assistance of archivist Renu Barrett in locating this material.

¹⁶ As well as by St. Martin's Press in London and New York.

¹⁷ At least one biographer has questioned Laurence's assertion about the particular difficulties for women writers. Lyall Powers records that "the pages of the *Manitoban* in the fall of 1944 were liberally sprinkled with the names of female authors. . . . Peggy's own shyness and timidity obliged her to continue masking her sexual identity as a published author throughout most of her first year at United College" (58).

¹⁸ Letter to Gordon Elliot, 1 November 1962, cited in King (179).

¹⁹ Laurence later sold the film rights to the novel for thirty thousand dollars, using some

of the money to buy Elm Cottage. The film, *Rachel, Rachel*, starring Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, won an Academy Award for Best Picture in 1968.

²⁰ The letters that follow have not been previously published. All of the correspondence prior to 16 October 1969 is located in the William Ready fonds, box 9.

²¹ There are few extant copies of Ready's replies. Most were probably handwritten.

²² The upper-case letters are in Laurence's original letter.

²³ The letters that follow indicate that the dates given for the earliest accruals in McMaster's fonds description of the Laurence material do not reflect the actual dates of acquisition; see archives.mcmaster.ca/index.php/margaret-laurence-fonds.

²⁴ According to her memoir, Laurence received the offer for the film rights to *A Jest of God* through her agent about a week after her return to England; however, despite now having the down payment required, she still had difficulty obtaining a mortgage: "I had two strikes against me. I was a woman and I was a writer" (*Dance* 181).

²⁵ Among Laurence's letters of this period is an information form from McClelland and Stewart headed "About Books and Authors." Laurence filled in her name, her Elm Cottage address, and her date of birth, completing the form with "Present occupation: Mother."

²⁶ Undated but circa 25 September 1968.

²⁷ See Laurence's letters of 22 October 1968 and 8 January 1969 (both in Wainwright 158-59).

²⁸ Letter of 22 October 1968 (reproduced in Wainwright 158-59).

²⁹ A work with a similar title, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, written by Northrop Frye, appeared in 1971.

³⁰ Laurence to Ready, 30 December [1968].

³¹ Laurence to Ready, 8 January 1969.

³² *Spectator* [Hamilton], 8 March 1969, p. 26.

³³ Laurence to Ready, 22 October 1968 (Wainwright 159).

³⁴ This letter and those that follow are located in the Master File, Laurence, Margaret Papers — Financial and Legal, Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University. McMaster acquired both manuscripts.

³⁵ See her letter of 3 May 1971 to JGM: "I arrive in Tor on May 25. McMaster giving me an Hon Degree. Doc Letters. Heavens. Will attend their convocation on May 28" (Davis and Morra 239).

³⁶ McMaster's finding aid description of the Laurence archive contains annotated photocopies of *The Diviners* typescript (box 3, F.1-F.3) but no notebooks.

³⁷ Graham R. Hill succeeded Ready as university librarian in 1979.

³⁸ See archives.mcmaster.ca/index.php/margaret-laurence-fonds.

³⁹ See the fonds-level description at archivesfa.library.yorku.ca/fonds/ON00370-f0000341.htm.

⁴⁰ See archives.mcmaster.ca/index.php/margaret-laurence-fonds.

⁴¹ William Ready fonds, box 9, file 2. The photocopy of his letter is dated 9 April (the year has been supplied from internal evidence).

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